

# The Limits of International Relations Theory: A Postcolonial Critique

Written by Sanjay Seth

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SANJAY SETH, AUG 24 2012

In the first part of this article, a postcolonial critique of mainstream IR (in which I include the English School), I argue that where IR theory has been interested in history at all, it has misdescribed the origins and character of the contemporary international order, and that an accurate understanding of the 'expansion of the international system' requires attention to its colonial origins. In the second part I suggest that mainstream IR is deeply Eurocentric, not only in its historical account of the emergence of the modern international order, but also in its account of the nature and functioning of this order. The third part of the article addresses the human sciences as heirs to a tradition of knowledge which defines knowledge as a relation between a cognizing, representing subject and an object, such that knowledge is always 'of' something out there, which exists independently of its apprehension. What this overlooks is that knowledges serve to constitute that which they purport to merely cognise or represent; in the case of IR theory, it serves to naturalise that which is historically produced.

### History

A great deal of IR displays little interest in history, for history is unimportant if the defining feature of the international order is considered to be the transhistorical fact of 'anarchy': thus Kenneth Waltz, for instance, writes that "the enduring anarchic character of international politics accounts for the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia..."[i] There are, however, those in the discipline who, even when they see anarchy as the defining feature of the international order, are nonetheless interested in how this historically evolved; and how an order which, in their account, first developed in Europe in the early modern period, came to encompass the globe. I refer of course to the 'English School', which has the considerable merit of enquiring into the historical origins of the contemporary international system.

However, the account of the 'expansion of international society' offered by the English School in influential texts such as Adam Watson's *The Evolution of International Society* and Buzan and Little's *International Systems in World History* is Eurocentric and mistaken. Ironically, many of the authors of the English School are well aware of, and consciously seek to avoid, Eurocentrism. Buzan and Little, for instance, argue that the Eurocentrism of IR mars its understanding of past international systems, and its capacity to comprehend changes that may lie in the future. But its Eurocentric assumptions 'make sense for most of the modern era' for there is no doubt that the existing international system, forged over the preceding few centuries, has its origins in Europe and must be understood with reference to a specifically European history. "The European empires can...be seen as the nursery, or mechanism, by which the political form of the modern state was transposed onto the rest of the world", write Buzan and Little, and since "the modern state is a quintessentially European phenomenon...it is therefore to Europe's story that one has to look to explain it."[ii] Thus while IR is admittedly Eurocentric in its understanding of the world, that Eurocentrism is warranted for the modern period- or as Hedley Bull and Watson had put it sixteen years earlier,

"The present international political structure of the world... is, at least in its most basic features, the legacy of Europe's now vanished ascendancy. Because it was in fact Europe and not America, Asia, or Africa that first dominated and, in so doing, unified the world, it is not our perspective but the historical record itself that can be called Eurocentric."[iii]

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This narrative of the expansion of political forms is modelled on the conventional account of the expansion of economic and social forms, that is, of the spread of capitalism (or modernity). This conventional account, which informs many disciplines, and is deeply ingrained in popular understandings, is one which presumes that capitalism began in Europe, and later radiated outwards through trade, armies and the like. For some time now, there have been alternative accounts of the development of capitalist modernity, ones in which the development of capitalism and modernity is not a tale of endogenous development in Europe, but of structural interconnections between different parts of the world that long predated Europe's ascendance- and that, according to some accounts, provided the conditions for that ascendance.[iv] What is significant for my purposes is not which, if any, of these accounts of the development and growth of capitalist modernity is accurate. But rather that the conventional account of the rise of capitalist modernity has been challenged by those who have noted that trade was not confined to inter-European trade, that the conquest of the Americas – and the influx of gold and silver which followed – played a part in the development of capitalism in Europe, and that the supply of raw materials from the colonies, and the existence of captive colonial markets for European manufactured goods, also played a part- in short, that Europe's relations with the world outside Europe may be relevant.

The 'expansion of international society' narrative, which in virtually all particulars follows the conventional account of the rise and spread of capitalist modernity – first the West, then the rest- has however not been seriously challenged or questioned. A rare exception within IR observes, "At the same time that the 'Westphalian system' of equally and mutually independent territorially sovereign states was taking shape, quite different colonial and imperial systems were being established beyond Europe." [v] Just as the period that saw the development of capitalism coincided with colonial conquest and trade, so too did the events and processes privileged in the conventional account of IR- the peace of Augsburg and the settlement of Westphalia – roughly coincide with the subjugation and settlement of the Americas, the rise of the slave trade, the founding of the British East India Company and the Dutch East India Company, Macartney's mission to the Middle Kingdom, and so on. The nineteenth century heyday of this European international system is also the period of the race for colonies, the carving up of Africa, of the development of political forms of rule such as mandates, paramountcy, concessions and franchises, spheres of interest and influence, protectorates and so on. Any satisfactory account of the emergence of the modern international system, I suggest, needs to explore the ways in which international society was shaped by the interaction between Europe and those it colonized. For some decades now, a burgeoning scholarship- some of it undertaken under the sign of postcolonial theory, some not- has sought to explore the ways in which literature, sexuality, politics and political theory, science and much else besides in the West, were affected, and sometimes decisively shaped, by colonialism and empire. The same, I suggest, needs to be done for any account of the emergence of international society.

## Culture and Theory

IR realist and neo-realist strands of scholarship are not interested in questions of culture and culturally derived notions of what counts as morality. Since states simply exist, and by their nature pursue their interests, or else are compelled to do so by the systemic and structural circumstances of anarchy, the rules that govern state interaction are not seen to have anything to do with culture. Culture belongs to disciplines other than IR. In seeking to interrogate the place of culture and difference in mainstream IR, I therefore once again turn to those influenced by the English School, because the English School at least recognizes that the question of culture is central to, rather than peripheral to, international politics.

Robert Jackson's *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* makes an eloquent argument for the achievements of modern international society, which he characterizes as a covenant that recognizes and respects cultural and moral diversity, while avoiding many of its potentially unhappy effects. In contrast to earlier systems which excluded many as 'barbarians', 'savages' and the like, this order is "inclusive rather than exclusive, and is based expressly on...pluralist ethics...the first bona fide normative discourse that communicates with and accommodates all the world's cultures and civilizations: human political diversity on a global scale." [vi] The question confronted by this new order, according to Jackson was this: given the irreducible heterogeneity of the world's people, but given also that these peoples interact in numerous ways, they "are going to have to find some mutually intelligible and mutually acceptable, or adequate, terms upon which they can conduct their relations...These terms must go beyond existing cultures and civilizations." [vii] That is, the rules governing their interactions must be

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acceptable to all, without being those 'of' any constituent.

This is the problem to which equal state sovereignty, self-determination and non-intervention are the solution. These allow each constituent to choose and pursue its own 'domestic' way of life, while providing norms and rules for their interaction. These are procedural rules rather than substance, mere form rather than content. In Jackson's words, international law and diplomatic practice allow for interaction between "the various political systems of a large and highly diverse planetary population", without "require[ing] that statespeople must necessarily share deeper assumptions regarding social morality or political culture that are characteristic of particular civilizations." [viii] 'Content' lies on the side of the state, each of which is different; 'procedure' governs their interactions, belongs to no one in particular, and thus can be accepted by all.

The problem Jackson poses for relations between states or peoples is a problem as old as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: once people were conceived of as free individuals, each possessed of his own property, religion, desires, goals and interests, how were they to interact with each other in a public domain, amicably if possible, but with principles to regulate their interaction and resolve conflict where it was not possible? The revolutions of 1776 and 1789 resolved this dilemma by means of a distinction between form and content, substance and procedure. As Marx brilliantly demonstrated in *On the Jewish Question*, the private now became the locus of particularity and content, while the public and political was constituted as a domain of formal and procedural rules regulating the interaction of individuals, but devoid of any content or particularity; blind to particularities such as religion and property, and partaking of none of them. Thus the modern political order was begun, and liberalism, the champion of this insurgent order, and its official face once it was triumphant, began its long career. But this answer or solution was beset by problems from the beginning, and so too is the international version of it.

In the realm of what IR calls 'domestic' political theory, one problem was that the purely 'procedural' was in fact highly substantive and normative; far from being neutral, as critics pointed out, the procedural norms adopted presupposed, and thus favoured, Christian values over other values, men over women, and so on. [ix] The development of liberal political theory has in part been a process of seeking to 'purify' these procedures and norms of their content. Rawlsian liberalism famously invents the 'original position' and the 'veil of ignorance' to demonstrate, upon the foundation of a few minimal presuppositions, that rational individuals would choose procedural rules that favoured no one kind of individual, or substantive quality or attribute, such as race or wealth. Tellingly, in his later work Rawls finds that even this is not neutral or procedural enough; he abjures 'metaphysical' in favour of 'political' liberalism, an increasingly thin, spare or stripped-down liberalism which seeks to avoid presuming and thus privileging even the liberal values of individualism and autonomy. [x] But this also, I would suggest, fails, and is bound to fail, for there simply are no 'neutral' procedural assumptions- all presumptions, including (perhaps especially) ones about what it means to be human, to be rational and desiring, are historically and culturally produced, and are thus 'particular' rather than universal. [xi]

What is an insuperable problem for 'domestic' political theory is no less so for IR theory. Jackson is aware, of course, that the procedural rules he refers to, do, in fact, arise from a particular historical and socio-cultural setting. International law, he writes "although European in origin, has been adopted around the world"; and similarly the norms and practices of diplomacy are "originally European but now universal." [xii] We have every reason, however, to doubt the 'universality' of international law, and to doubt that although originally European, it was cleansed of any cultural particularities, and became a neutral resource available to all. Antony Anghie finds instead that "Over the centuries, international law developed a sophisticated series of technologies, doctrines, and disciplines that borrowed in important ways from the broader justifications of colonialism to address the problem of the governance of non-European peoples;" [xiii] and James Gathii persuasively argues that this legacy continues to affect the workings of international law. [xiv] In any case, 'widespread', 'general' and even 'global' are not the same thing as 'universal'. The ubiquity of a practice or norm tells us nothing about its origins or the circumstances under which it was adopted (or imposed). 'Universal' suggests not just ubiquity, but some sort of transhistorical, transcultural, and/or transcendental warrant; it is no argument to suggest as Jackson does, that the acceptance of these norms/procedures by non-Western states renders these norms/procedures universal, purging them of their particularistic, Western origins, any more than the adoption of the mini-skirt by all women (or for that matter, the burqa) would make these 'universal' features of womanhood.

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In short, the difficulties that political theory runs into when trying to equate the procedural with mere form, devoid of any particularistic content, are also encountered by international theory whenever it similarly seeks to acknowledge and yet disavow the importance of culture. In fact, this is even *more* of a problem for IR than for political theory. If the claimed universality of procedures or form is equally problematic for both, on the other side of the equation, the unit which is thought to be the source and bearer of content is especially problematic for IR. It seems intuitively obvious that humans are in some sense indivisible individuals, and therefore it is plausible to talk of them having desires, needs, interests and the like. In the next section of this paper I will suggest that even this is only seemingly obvious, and that it is a result of a historical process that has naturalized historically produced and therefore particularistic assumptions – but it clearly will not do to assume that ‘cultures’ and ‘civilizations’ are unitary beings possessed of ‘a’ need, interest etc. And it is even more problematic to assume, as IR does when it tries to reconcile content with form, and substance with procedure, that cultures or civilizations are isomorphic with nation-states: to assume, in short, that the diversity which is here being characterized and valued is embodied or instantiated in and by the nation-state.

## Knowing and Being

In the preceding section I suggested that we cannot treat collectivities, whether cultures or nations, *as if* they were like individuals, even by analogy. But this does not mean that individuals are natural, while cultures and nations are historical and constructed. We are accustomed to think that the social contract theorists of the seventeenth century awoke to the fact that men are born free, rational and equal, equipped with the capacity for willing, desiring and promising. However there are those who have also sought to show that the free, equal, rational and unitary individual presumed by the social sciences as an incontestable fact is no such thing; like the nation and state, s/he is a product of processes and discourses. The prime source for such ‘sceptical’ modes of thinking is of course Nietzsche, who in *Genealogy of Morals* and other writings argued that the individual capable of making promises, seeing in effects a consequence of the exercise of the will, and feeling guilt, was forged on the anvil of Greek philosophy, Christian morality and Roman law. Partly inspired by Nietzsche’s work, Foucault’s writings have in turn influenced those who have similarly sought to show how the individual was produced, including produced by the knowledges which posited him, rather than ‘discovered’ by a knowledge which finally recognised what had always been there, awaiting to be unveiled (as in Jacob Burckhardt’s classic account, in which the “veil” which made man “conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation” finally lifted in Renaissance Italy, enabling man to recognise himself as a “spiritual individual”[xv]). In contrast and contestation with accounts which trace the emergence into sunlight of the individual subject who had once been shrouded in darkness (but who nonetheless had always been there, awaiting discovery), there are now accounts which trace the creation of this individual through various historical processes, including social, economic and discursive transformations.[xvi]

The free, equal, rational and unitary individual is not a fact of the world, the starting point of knowledge, but rather, a consequence or product which has been naturalised such that it can seem to be a fact. The elements which have produced it as a fact include those knowledges and discourses which purport to simply recognise and represent the fact that they have helped to produce. It is not that the individual is real and that culture and nation are cobbled together and contingent, but rather that the former has stabilised, and the marks of its manufacture have, over time, been erased; such is not the case with state and nation, which continue to be contingent and contested, with the struggles that went into their making often still inscribed on their bodies. Liberal political theory, one could say, has had more success in naturalising the individual than mainstream IR theory has had in naturalising state, nation and the international order.

## Conclusion

‘The international’ is a realm where endless and seemingly irresolvable contestations- over meanings and morals as much as resources and power- testify to the fact that few things have become so naturalised that they are not potentially subject to contestation, few presumptions so stabilised that they are not periodically destabilised. In this sense, there *is* something to the importance accorded to the sovereignty/anarchy distinction, even if not in the sense that mainstream IR usually appreciates it. In what is still one of the most illuminating texts on the subject, *Leviathan*, Hobbes shows that sovereignty is the name and form of a capacity to impose and stabilize meanings. It is always a function of strategies and tactics, struggles and conflicts, and to that degree, contingent and variable. This becomes

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especially apparent in the international realm, where no sovereignty has yet succeeded in imposing stable meanings.

It is precisely this- the fact that in the international realm meanings have not become stabilized, and the precarious and contested nature of modernity can be more readily seen- that makes 'the international' especially interesting. However, the discipline which makes the international its object of its enquiry is, for the most part, an obstacle to a recognition and exploration of this, rather than a guide to it. Mainstream IR seems content to naturalise what it could problematise, and to assume that which it should deconstruct: whence the need for its critique.

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[i] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw Hill 1979), 66.

[ii] Buzan and Little, *International Systems*, 246.

[iii] Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, "Introduction", in Bull and Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1984), 2.

[iv] Andre Gunder Frank, for instance, writes that, "Europe did not pull itself up by its own economic bootstraps, and certainly not thanks to any kind of European 'exceptionalism' of rationality, institutions, entrepreneurship, technology...instead Europe used its American money to muscle in on and benefit from Asian production, markets, trade- in a word, to profit from the predominant position of Asia in the world economy" - Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (University of California Press, 1998), 4-5. See also John Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); J.M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (Guildford Press, 1993); Gurminder Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan 2007); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2000); Roy Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of Western Experience* (Cornell University Press, 1997); and various works by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, including "Connected Histories - Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia", *Modern Asian Studies*, 31:3 (July 1997).

[v] Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press 2002), 97.

[vi] Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford University Press 2000), 14.

[vii] Jackson, *The Global Covenant*, 14-15.

[viii] Jackson, *The Global Covenant*, 24.

[ix] For a very influential example of this sort of argument, see Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford University Press, 1988).

[x] See John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 14:3 (1985), and also *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press).

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[xi] On this see Sanjay Seth, "Liberalism and the Politics of (Multi)Culture: or, Plurality is not Difference" *Postcolonial Studies*, 4:1 (2001).

[xii] Jackson, *The Global Covenant*, 24.

[xiii] Antony Anghie, "Decolonizing the Concept of 'Good Governance'", in Branwen Gruffydd Jones (ed), *Decolonizing International Relations* (Rowman and Littlefield 2006), 123. See also his *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge University Press 2005); and Siba Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns and Africans: Race and Self-determination in International Law* (University of Minnesota Press 2006).

[xiv] James Gathii, *War, Commerce, and International Law* (Oxford University Press 2009), and "Dispossession through International Law: Iraq in Historical and Comparative Context", in Gruffydd Jones (ed), *Decolonizing International Relations*.

[xv] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Trans. By S.C.G. Middlemore (New York: Mentor, 1960), 121.

[xvi] See, for instance. Heller, Sosna and Wellbery (eds), *Reconstructing Individualism* (Stanford University Press 1986); Nikloas Rose, *Governing the Soul: Shaping of the Private Self* (Free Association Books; 2<sup>nd</sup>, Revised edition, 1999), and "Authority and the Genealogy of Subjectivity", in P. Heelas, S. Lash and P. Morris (eds) *Detraditionalization* (Wiley-Blackwell 1995); Roy Porter (ed), *Rewriting the Self* (Routledge 1997).

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